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AUTHOR Cuttance, Peter
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of quality assurance in New South Wales school systems, which was created from the restructuring of traditional centralized bureaucracies. The emergent structure is comprised of devolved networks of schools operating within decentralized state systems. The purposes of these school systems are to enhance network effectiveness and to implement government policy initiatives. The paper first discusses the organizations that have evolved from recent reforms to decentralize school systems in most Australian states. It next discusses quality-assurance programs in school systems and analyzes key features of school inspectorates that existed for most of the first century of Australian public education. The role of quality assurance in the emerging network school systems is also described. If school systems are to develop as network organizations, the following issues must be addressed: the amount of line management needed for implementation; access and exit arrangements for member organizations; and community and government roles. One table is included. (Contains 25 references.) (LMI)

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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RESTRUCTURED SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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Peter Cuttance
Assistant Director–General
(Quality Assurance)

NSW DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Quality Assurance in Restructured School Systems

Introduction

In this chapter discusses the role of quality assurance in school systems created from the restructuring of traditional centralised bureaucracies. The emergent organisational architecture in such organisations can be characterised as devolved networks of schools operating within decentralised state systems. These school systems have small strategic cores which exist for the purpose of making the net work and for development and implementation of the policy initiatives of elected governments.

The chapter commences with a discussion of the emergent organisations that have emanated from recent reforms which have sought to decentralise school systems in most Australian states. This provides a context for the main section which discusses quality assurance in school systems. Former approaches based on quality control are discussed through an analysis of key features of the school inspectorates that existed for most of the first century of public education. The role of quality assurance in the emergent network school systems as we approach the eve of the 21st Century is then addressed.

The Contemporary Organisational and Management Environment

Recent reforms in Australian state education systems have generated organisations which provide an increased level of delegated management to schools—giving them greater authority and responsibility to make decisions over matters which directly impact on student learning. In most education systems in Australia and elsewhere this is being implemented as the decentralisation and devolution[1] of decision making. In practice, devolution in a network organisation is most often manifest as the delegation of authority and responsibility to operational units, but the retention of overall policy and operational management co-ordination at the centre, with continuous communication between the operational units and the centre. In its simplest form, decentralisation refers to the redistribution of decision making powers and authority to local (regional) branches of head office, but in most Australian state school systems it is accompanied also by a measure of operational autonomy because the 'head office' has been shorn of most if its operational role and transformed into the policy hub for the system. This is sometimes described as

[1] I use the term devolution throughout in the sense defined in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1983): "The delegation of portions of duties to subordinate committees".

separating the *steering* and *rowing* functions of the organisation (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993).

School Systems as Networks

One way of describing recent organisational reforms is to view the resulting education systems as a *federal organisation* (Handy, 1989). From the starting point of independent units, the establishment of a federal organisation would require that the individual units surrender their sovereign autonomy to a central co-ordinating function, ie. come together to form a *system*. In reality the application of the concept of the federal organisation to extant state school systems needs to be viewed as confederation, since the movement would be from a centralised system to a more devolved system than the one already in existence.

Some writers on organisations (eg. Harman *et al*, 1991) refer to this form of organisational architecture as the *network* organisation, in which assets, knowledge and competence are distributed; that is, they reside in multiple locations. Unlike the typical hierarchical organisation, resources are not concentrated in the centre, nor are they disbursed entirely to operating units. The interdependency among the units in the organisation is facilitated through shared goals, management practices and common incentives (Gerstein, 1992). Essentially, the organisation exists as a network of operating units which share common or symbiotic visions and a strategic core provides the web of functions which makes the net work. Described in these terms a network organisation can be one which is either a highly devolved hierarchical organisation or a truly federal organisation.

The key characteristic of a federal organisation is *subsidiarity*. In such an organisation there is a considerable degree of interdependence, in that each part needs the other and the core in order to survive. Too much independence leads to disintegration of the organisation—a conglomerate of disconnected and disjointed parts.

The core's power in such an organisation comes from the role given to it by the constituent members of the organisation, and it does not so much direct and control its members but co-ordinate, advise, influence and suggest. This requires a 'tight–loose'[2] management and leadership framework. It is 'tight' in the sense that the centre is responsible for ensuring that the agreed strategic directions are implemented and monitored, and 'loose' in that it grants the operational and support units discretion to get on with the work of the organisation. The glue which holds a federal organisation together is the agreed and shared values and vision for the system, which replaces the

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[2] The concept of tight–loose coupling in educational organisations was introduced by Weick (1976), although it is mistakenly often referred to as being derivative of the recent business literature (cf. Peters and Waterman, 1982).

administrative linkages that characterised the centrally controlled hierarchical structures of school systems in the past.

Current developments in curriculum policy reflect this characteristic of organisations: the 'what' of curriculum is set out in systemically agreed curriculum guidelines. Compliance in the provision of learning opportunities for students is monitored against these curriculum guidelines. The 'how' of teaching to this agreed curriculum is, however, a professional responsibility delegated to school staff. The effective implementation of curriculum frameworks now under development depends on a shared vision of the learning opportunities to be offered to students. It is necessary that this vision is shared by all major stakeholders in the educational process, which means that it will be necessary for all parties to be participants in the development of the vision.

In state school systems the shared vision reflects, *inter alia*, the electoral mandate provided to government for the implementation of particular policies and programs. State school systems are characterised by a unified system of schools accessible to all, therefore, universally serving the needs of a diverse student population. The process of translating programs and policies into operational procedures, guidelines and frameworks provides the opportunity for those responsible for their ultimate implementation as teaching for learning, to participate in the process of building collective ownership for the vision.

In a true federal organisation, mistakes cannot be prevented by central intervention, only put to use in terms of learning how to avoid similar mistakes in the future. Leaders in such organisations must remember that the achievement of the vision of the organisation is dependent on the work of others. This is particularly important in the context of the flatter management structures which such organisations typically adopt.

Within Australian state school systems the central core retains control over the operations of individual schools through a line–management structure—that is, they are in essence decentralised organisations. If they were restructured further to become federal organisations this central core would retain 'control' only through global funding accountabilities and suasion to the extent that the core is the repository of the power of collective authority for the organisation.

Centralised bureaucratic systems rely on processes for checking whether administrative procedures have been followed—in-built compliance monitoring—rather than on assessing the effectiveness of processes and the extent to which educational objectives have been met—effectiveness monitoring. Such systems operate on set rules, procedures and statute in order to make the overburdened administrative function at the centre manageable. These legalistic processes designed for controlling the work of the organisation reduces its responsiveness and effectiveness. This provides one of the reasons why change in bureaucratic organisations is often of a

cataclysmic nature. The control structures function like tectonic plates holding the structures of the organisation together. Stress builds up due to external forces for change, and the resulting movements are akin to organisational earthquakes.

Devolution of Authority and Operational Management

The increased level of delegation of authority to schools in the recent reforms has resulted in a lessening of the direct exercise of formal control over the everyday managerial actions of schools. Informal structures and process of leadership, coaching, mentoring, etc, now provide the primary avenues through which the system can influence the everyday actions of schools. Performance agreements provide a basis for the necessary accountability relationship. Such agreements are an aspect of the phenomenon of the tight–loose coupling in organisations—increased authority over how outcomes are achieved is coupled with tighter accountability for achieving the outcomes. In earlier centralised systems accountability focussed more on the means of achieving outcomes than on the achievement of the outcomes themselves.

Devolution, however, should be viewed as a necessary but, by itself, not sufficient reform to improve student learning. In this context the research literature has documented the potential outcomes for systems which have increased the level of authority for decision making at the school–level:[3]

- schools can be more responsive to student learning needs than when the system is managed primarily through central administrative controls
- schools can adapt resources and procedures more effectively to student needs
- school–based management can provide a more effective environment for supporting school improvement
- school staff can feel more empowered as educational leaders—none of the research on systems which have moved to school–based management has suggested that school staff would prefer a return to the centralised systems that existed previously
- decisions are made at school–level or centrally depending on where they are made most effectively, rather than centrally for reasons of regulation and control
- the decisions made may be more rational in relation to the needs of clients
- there is greater accountability for the effective management of resources when devolution is enjoined with effective review practices to assess the extent to which schools are meeting the needs of their communities

[3] See Brown (1990) for a research review of the evidence from the North American context.

- there is an increased focus on effectiveness rather than on efficiency perceived as cost accounting, although efficiencies in schools may be increased also because resources are better matched to school tasks
- the process provides a public expression of confidence and support for school personnel as the professionals who are responsible for making the key decisions about student learning.

There are direct implications for quality assurance in the shift to devolved organisational structures. Compliance monitoring has to be augmented by evaluation of the effectiveness of the organisation in terms of its final outcomes. It is not sufficient simply to monitor outcomes. The shared nature of the ownership of the system requires that the quality assurance process itself actively contribute to the development of effective implementation practices and processes, including feedback on the appropriateness of operational procedures, frameworks, and guidelines for achieving the organisation's overarching goals. Quality assurance in such organisations thus addresses the dual issues of accountability—proving quality—and development—improving quality.

A key difference between federal organisations and decentralised or devolved organisations lies in their authority structures. In a federal organisation the authority of the centre is provided at the pleasure of the operational units through the process of their federation as a unified system. In a decentralised system the authority of the centre derives from the traditional hierarchical organisational structure. In terms of process, the devolved network organisation must rely on consent, incentive and collaboration, while the decentralised hierarchical organisation can also rely on the directive powerof its its line–management structure for its decision making authority.

The restructuring of state school systems in Australia has resulted in network organisational structures with a considerably increased degree of decentralisation to regional centres. These centres have the function of superintending the operational implementation of systemic policies and programs and services to support schools in a geographical area. The reforms have also resulted in a considerably increased level of devolution of authority to schools. The resulting school systems in their present form cannot be described as networks in the sense intended by Handy above, however, there are indications that clusters of schools are beginning to utilise their new found freedom to work collaboratively together in what amounts to a nascent network model. Given time and organic development, networks of schools may emerge as a significant feature of state school systems. In such systems, we might expect to see an increased role for professional groups, such as Principal's Councils, in the initiation and development of systemic policy.

Strong support for this type of organisational architecture in school systems is found in a recent Australian discussion of restructuring over the last decade or so:

> [I]t is a structure with a lot to commend it, providing those who are involved with it understand its rationale and provided that appropriate structures at school level are put in place and resource levels are adequate for the tasks required of schools. (Harman *et al*, 1991: 310)

Accountability in Decentralised Systems

The devolution of management from central to decentralised and network systems requires a change in the accountability mechanisms. Where devolution involves the divestiture of accountability for the operations of schools from the centre to locally elected bodies, such as the School Boards in England or New Zealand, the substance of what the various governing groups are accountable for also changes. For example, the New Zealand Government funds state schools and is accountable to parliament for the use of these public funds. Thus, the government of the day is accountable for the efficiency and effectiveness of the services provided by schools. The day-to-day accountability for the operation of schools, however, resides with the locally elected school board for each school.

Devolution in Australia has, however, taken a somewhat different form. In contradistinction to the *electoral* form of devolution that has emerged in New Zealand, the Australian states have implemented an *administrative* form of devolution. These administrative models are best described as devolved systems, rather than networks, since their policy and accountability functions remain at the centre That is, they remain quintessentially state government systems. This is in contrast to the New Zealand school system which might best be described as a public system of schools, one that provides the public with access at the local level through both an electoral and a client role.

Kogan defines accountability as "a condition in which individual role holders [or organisations] are liable to review and the application of sanctions if their actions fail to satisfy those with whom they are in an accountability relationship" (1986: 25). Becher *et al* (1979) have indicated the multifaceted nature of accountability. They distinguish three separate elements to accountability in school systems:

- moral accountability – answerability to one's clients
- professional accountability – responsibility to oneself and one's colleagues
- contractual accountability – accountability to one's employers or political masters.

The locus and balance between these three elements varies with the organisational structure of school systems. For example, an independent school which does not have formal organisational links to other schools is primarily accountable in the first two senses above, however, that school is likely to have a board of management which has formal responsibility for its financial affairs. In reality, most non-government schools are contractually

accountable to a governing body or belong to a system which exercises power over the governance of the school. Schools established as 'commercial trading enterprises' are contractually accountable to their board of directors. Schools within government education systems are also clearly accountable in all three senses described above. Ultimately, accountability in the contractual sense in state school systems is an extension of the political accountability of Ministers to Parliament.

Quality assurance as a contributor to both the accountability and development functions in school systems would appear suited to these emergent structures, whether they materialise as network organisations in the future or remain as devolved systems with the centre retaining responsibility for policy development in response to the initiatives of elected governments. The collaborative nature and quasi–independence of quality assurance structures from the operational functions of school systems allows them to be responsive to the needs of schools, and governments, as would be required in a network system, and also to provide the evaluative assessments, independent of day-to-day operations, necessary for them to contribute to the public accountability of school systems.

Assuring and Managing Quality in Education Systems

Most education systems derivative of British systems of state provided education have at one time or another developed school inspectorates. In fact, the early history of these systems was marked by a significant role for school inspectors. The first appointments as members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) in England were made in December 1839. The establishment of HMI was based on the precedent set by the inspection of factories following the Factory Act, from 1802 onwards. As in the case of inspectors appointed for the latter purpose, inspectors of schools did not necessarily have a background in education; they were more likely to be from the clergy than from any other profession (Sutherland, 1973: 58).

These developments were mirrored in Australia. For example, the first inspector of schools in South Australia was Dr William Wyatt, Secretary to the Medical Board of South Australia. He was appointed in 1851 with the following brief: "His Excellency desires me to say that he does not consider it necessary to give any detailed instructions as to your duties, since the office being a new one His Excellency, placing every confidence in your zeal and abilities, thinks it better to leave you to the exercise of your own judgement upon them." (Smeaton, 1927: 60) In the early days Wyatt and a subsequent appointee were not able to visit schools that were most remote from Adelaide. Such schools were 'inspected' by magistrates, justices of the peace, ministers of religion, district councillors and others (Jones, 1985).

In both the United Kingdom and Australia the role of the inspectorate varied considerably over the years. During the latter years of the last century the inspectorate was involved in the examination of pupils. At other times it has been involved in the examination and licensing of teachers, the recruitment of teachers, and the training and development of teachers.

The practice of the inspectorate in carrying out school inspections has also varied over the years. A principal recorded a description of an inspection visit by Dr Wyatt as follows, "about 11.15 on Wednesday the doctor came along. He looked at the roll–book, had a little chat with the teacher, heard the upper class read, asked a few questions, told us we were very good boys, and gave us a half-holiday. By 12.15 we were all out at play. The system was beautiful in its simplicity. It followed the line of least resistance. It created no friction. It economised the time." (Kanem, 1915: 14)

In England, school inspection in the post–war period has generally been viewed as containing three principal elements:

- a check on the use of public funds (the accountability function)
- the provision of information to central government concerning the success or otherwise of the education system, based on the Inspectorate's independent professional judgement (the eyes and ears of the Secretary of State function)
- the provision of advice to those responsible for the running of educational establishments (the advisory function). (Lawton and Gordon, 1987)

Quality Control in the Education Systems of Yesterday

Quality control in education systems has focussed on the provision of education and on student outcomes, for example, payment by results, examination of students and other aspects of accountability based on outcomes. In 1840 the instructions to inspectors in England divided their duties into three categories. First, to inquire into applications for grants to build or support schools; second, to inspect schools aided by grants; third, to inquire into the general condition of elementary education in particular schools. The first secretary to the committee of the Privy Council on Education, established in 1839, recommended that inspectors of schools should be appointed 'to visit schools to be henceforth aided by public money', (Lawton and Gordon, 1987: 8), and to make the award of grants to schools conditional upon inspection.

In South Australia also, the narrow quality control aspect of inspection was evident from its dominant accountability role in the examination of pupils and the policing of regulations. "[T]he rigid nature of inspections and examinations was a wholesome terror for dilatory individuals, and inspectors had made it not possible for drunkards to continue as teachers, or persons who had failed at

everything else to turn to school–keeping." (Inspector Stanton, quoted in Jones, 1985: 93)

The most restrictive quality control role of the Inspectorate, however, emanated from the 1858 Royal Commission in England, which recommended that better efficiency should be achieved by examining "every child in every school to which grants are to be paid with a view to ascertaining whether these indispensable elements of knowledge are thoroughly acquired, and to make the prospects and position of the teacher dependent to a considerable extent on the results of this examination" (quoted in Lawton and Gordon, 1987: 11). It was this recommendation which was translated into the system of 'payment by results' in the Revised Code of 1862. As a result of the Revised Code the role of the inspector became very much one of the enforcer of the Code. Some HMI, in particular Matthew Arnold, were publicly critical of the damage being done to education by payment by results. Inspectors became feared and hated in the elementary schools rather than welcome as advisors, as they often had been previously: "[the inspector's] manner could be terrifying. He could choose passages for dictation which contained words quite outside the children's vocabulary, or he could deliberately exploit the difficulties of the English language." (quoted in Sturt, 1967: 351)

A similar system of payment by results was introduced in Australian systems, with the Inspectorate undertaking the examination of pupils; "Hartley relentlessly kept the inspectors' role firmly centred on examining and inspecting in his firm belief that this was the way to get an efficient system, improved standards, justice to teachers and children and value for money for the colony" (Jones, 1985: 143). A change to the regulations in South Australia in 1913 gave teachers the responsibility for assessing and promoting pupils. Although this took half of the job of the Inspectorate away, the Inspectors responded by emphasising the one role which nobody else could take from them, inspecting and examining in greater detail. They re-emphasised the role of the Inspectorate as assessing the teaching ability of teachers. Few challenged the accountability role of the inspectors, or the value for money purpose of inspections. The Inspectorate concentrated on the detailed assessment of teachers rather than advice to them, which teachers claimed was their great need. In fact, inspectors made the detailed inspections so minute in detail and exhaustive in scope that some teachers would have preferred to return to the early inspectors' annual examination. It was the same in Scotland when the inspectors' examination was dispensed with; some teachers preferred their old chains to their new freedom. (Jones, 1985: 194)

Quality Assurance in Network School Systems

The quality assurance focus, which goes beyond the quality control approach described above, has also been evident at different times among school inspectorates. For example, the citizens' charter in describing the

proposed new role for HMI in the UK said, "the inspectorates are concerned with value for money and standards of output and performance. However, their central responsibility is to check that the professional services that the public receives are delivered in the most effective way possible and genuinely meet the needs of those whom they serve." (UK Parliament, 1991: 40)

Although the quality assurance role requires an explicit statement of standards and criteria, education inspectorates have not been known for their preparedness to provide a public statement of these. One of the more explicit statements was made by the Central Board of Education in South Australia in 1874 when it prepared instructions for the guidance of inspectors, who were instructed on arrival at a school, to check immediately if the lesson corresponded to the timetable, examine the records and then conduct examinations in all subjects with special attention to the 3-R's. They were to point out faults and deficiencies and note them in the observation book for future reference. The report on each school had to cover its organisation, methods of teaching, instruction and progress, attendance records, and the notes made in the observation book (Jones, 1985: 49).

The UK Education (Schools) Act 1992 provides for a substantial revision of the role and function of HMI. The Chief Inspector now has the duty of keeping the Secretary of State informed about:

- the quality of the education provided by schools
- the educational standards achieved in those schools
- the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of children in schools
- whether the financial resources made available to those schools are managed efficiently.[4]

Further, the Chief Inspector shall give advice to the Secretary of State on such matters as may be requested.

What is Quality *Assurance*?

Quality assurance is defined as the planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that the education provided will meet the needs of clients. It is a system for ensuring that education outcomes are provided to the required standard within the available resources. Quality assurance focuses on the effectiveness of schooling and thereby seeks to prevent performance problems arising in the first place. Quality assurance is therefore one of the cornerstones of a quality system, the system for managing the quality of what as school system is attempting to achieve.

These definitions of quality systems and quality assurance are conceptual rather than operational. Many different operational strategies can be used to assure the quality of educational outcomes. There does not even need to be

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[4] House of Lords and House of Commons, *Education (Schools) Act 1992*.

consistency in procedures and operations from one part of the system to another. That would depend on whether uniform procedures were in fact the best way to achieve the desired quality outcomes. Thus, quality assurance is a way of evaluating the effectiveness of structures and processes required to achieve outcomes, it does not seek to prescribe the ways of doing things and does not require that we must do things in the same way across different parts of the system.

The approach of quality assurance is to seek to prevent defects arising in the first place: a system of activities for ensuring the production of a defined service to agreed standards within resources (Morgan and Everett, 1990: 25). This means "the prevention of quality problems through planned and systematic activities. These will include: the establishment of a good quality management system and the assessment of its adequacy, the audit of the operation of the system, and the review of the system itself." (Oakland, 1989: 10)

The International Standards Organisation (ISO) and its constituent organisations in various countries has established a Standard for quality assurance.[5] They define a quality system as one in which:

- the organisational structures, responsibilities, procedures, processes and resources are designed to implement the management of quality
- management develops, establishes and implements a quality system as the means by which stated policies and objectives are accomplished
- the quality system is structured and adapted to the organisation's particular type of business and takes account of the appropriate elements outlined in the International Standard
- the quality system functions in such a manner as to provide proper confidence that
  - the system is well understood and effective
  - the products or services do actually satisfy customers' expectations
  - emphasis is placed on problem prevention rather than dependence on detection after occurrence.

All elements of the quality system itself should be internally audited and evaluated on a regular basis. Audits should be carried out in order to determine whether various elements in the quality management system are effective in achieving stated quality objectives. For this purpose, an appropriate audit plan should be formulated and established by the management of the organisation. The audit plan should cover the following:

- the specific activities in the areas to be audited

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[5] These international standards are referenced as ISO9000 and ISO9004. The respective Australian Standards Association reference numbers are AS3900 and AS3904. The respective British Standards reference numbers are BS5750 Part 0 Section 0.1 and BS5750 Part 0 Section 0.2.

- qualifications required of personnel carrying out audits
- the basis for carrying out audits (eg. organisational changes, reported deficiencies, routine checks and surveys)
- procedures for reporting audit findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Objective evaluations of quality system elements should be carried out by competent personnel and cover organisational structures, administrative and operational procedures, personnel, equipment and material resources, work areas, operations and processes, items being produced (to establish the degree of conformance to standards and specifications), and documentation, reports and record–keeping.

Personnel carrying out such audits of quality system elements should be independent of the specific operational activities or areas being audited. Reports on the audit findings, conclusions and recommendations should be submitted in documentary form for consideration by appropriate members of the organisation's management. Such reports should cover the following:

- specific examples of non-compliance or deficiencies; possible reasons for such deficiencies, where evident, maybe included
- appropriate corrective actions
- implementation and effectiveness of corrective actions suggested in previous audits.

Provision should be made by the organisation for independent review and evaluation of the quality system itself. The review should be carried out by appropriate members of the organisation's management or by competent external independent personnel. Reviews should consist of well structured and comprehensive evaluations, including:

- findings of audits centred on various elements of the quality system
- the overall effectiveness of the quality management system in achieving stated quality objectives
- considerations for up-dating the quality management system in relation to changes brought about by new technologies, quality concepts, market strategies and social and environmental conditions.

Findings, conclusions and recommendations reached as a result of review and evaluation should be submitted in documentary form for the necessary action by the organisation's management.

Quality Assurance in the Public Sector

In discussing quality assurance in the context of public sector service organisations Pollitt (1990) has argued that it requires the establishment of explicit—and transparently arrived at—standards, which reflect the defined or stated needs of service users. Thus, quality assurance entails:

- identifying those features of a service which are of significance to users and their needs

- assessing any problems or deficiencies which appear to exist with respect to those features
- implementing improvements
- monitoring the situation. (ibid: 437)

The explicit standards required for quality assurance are, however, a departure from the usual intra-professional perspectives of quality. Explicit standards themselves de-mystify. Further, they can be used as the basis of a more intelligible system of public accountability. This approach also provides a role for service user judgements of the appropriateness and effectiveness of services.

In reference to education, Kogan (1986) has argued that many writers have assumed a close correspondence between professional autonomy and responsiveness to clients, but in practice the connection is anything but automatic. This approach also "contrasts with the often vague or idiosyncratic judgements which in the past have sometimes constituted the reputational currency of the . . . teaching professions." (Pollitt, 1990: 437)

The accountability of Government to parliament requires a demonstration that services are efficient and effective, and that they are capable of providing value for money. The audit and review of public sector organisations must therefore be designed to provide the information required to indicate whether the process and structures through which outcomes and services are produced are operating effectively, and to provide recommendations on ways in which these process can be improved. Thus, although quality assurance systems in the public sector address the fundamental issue of accountability, they must also operate in a way which maximises their contribution to the development and effectiveness of the organisation if they are to fulfil their function. That is, quality assurance brings together the common focus of accountability and development for a service. Accountability systems focus primarily on *proving* quality while development systems focus on *improving* quality.

What Does It Take to Assure Quality in a School System?

The framework of quality assurance as described in the foregoing has undergone significant adaptation when it has been implemented in school systems. First, it has been interpreted in the broad context of quality management, not as a narrow quality audit process. The narrow audit process would require the detailed prescription of standards for undertaking tasks. In its application to schooling, however, the criteria that have been developed are in terms of known effective ways of undertaking tasks, with the decision as to which practice is most effective in a given situation being treated as part of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the process. Thus, quality assurance reviews of schools have generally taken the form of effectiveness evaluations rather than the form of compliance audits or accreditation processes.

The approach of quality assurance is also very different to the focus of classical inspection systems, which are designed fundamentally to weed out the substandard and non-conforming practices and services before they reach students. As a process, inspection costs money but it makes no direct contribution to the production of quality practices and outcomes. Quality assurance on the other hand focuses directly on the processes and inputs required to achieve quality outcomes.

The core of quality assurance is the implementation of systematic review and development practices to ensure that quality is built–in to what schools do. That is, quality assurance must become integral to our way of working. Through this we seek to embed continuous improvement into everyday work practices throught the school system.

Characteristics of an Effective System for Managing Quality in Schools

The quality system must address the key dimensions of organisational structure and performance.

The needs of client groups are fundamental in determining the direction and development of a school. In general, the needs of a school community are a conflicting mix of needs. Schooling is not a single product service—as some industries are—it must meet the varied educational needs of the school community.

An emphasis on process, as well as outcomes, focuses a school on the performance of the whole school to ensure that its overall performance is more than the sum of its parts.

Strategic planning and effective management of school development should focus on meeting community needs within the context of systemic policies and resources. School development is augmented by continuous improvement as a key feature of organisations that learn from their experience in the present and past. Such schools take a proactive approach to planning and constructing their future, rather than simply responding to changes in their environment and situation.[6]

Schools gain direction and purpose through effective leadership, which among other things, leads to focussed involvement and ownership of the school's development program by its stakeholder groups. Decision making for both operational management and future development requires a base of evidence and data collected and analysed through monitoring, review and evaluation activities. Although monitoring should focus on the achievement of operational objectives, longer term strategic development also requires

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[6] This characterisation of quality systems should not be interpreted as synomous with a Total Quality Management (TQM) approach to managing quality. See Cuttance (1993) for a discussion of the relevance of TQM to government organisations, and to school systems in particular.

rigorous review and evaluation of the performance of programs in improving learning outcomes for students.

These features of a quality system for schools can be summarised as follows:

Structural Dimensions

- The External Environment
  - A focus on client needs within the context of systemic policy and resourcing.
- A Systems Perspective
  - An emphasis on process and an understanding of how changes in one part of the school's operations affect other parts of the school.
- A Learning Organisation
  - Learning from current practice and building–in continuous improvement.
- Constructing the Future
  - Strategic planning to create an organisation that is not only responsive to external forces but one that also interacts with and shapes external forces.
- Leadership
  - Providing direction and purpose through the focussed involvement of all stakeholder groups.

Performance Dimensions

- Decision Making
  - Devolved operational decision making based on routine monitoring of progress towards achieving operational objectives.
- An emphasis on outcomes
  - Review and evaluation of the effectiveness of programs in achieving the objective of improving student learning outcomes.

The experience of schools which have implemented a quality system along the lines outlined above has shown that certain strategies are particularly important to building and maintaining that system. These strategies are reinforced by findings from the school effectiveness literature:[7]

- a clear and shared vision of what students are to achieve in the particular school
- a means for translating this vision into a strategic development plan for the school
- ownership of the vision and development plan by all stakeholders in the school community – who is responsible, for what, and by when
- identification of the professional development requirements for staff to implement the school's development program

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[7] See for example the recent reviews by Reynolds (1992) and Levine (1992).

- structures and processes for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of the strategies for school development, with provision for feedback to the implementation process itself
- a periodic review and evaluation of achievements, one which takes stock of plans for further development in the school.

A commitment to staff development and training is vital if the school is to ensure that all members of the organisation are capable of and do achieve the outcomes that are stated in school plans. Such professional development needs to be integrated into the school's everyday operation in a way that allows individual staff to learn from colleagues and provide access to external sources of knowledge and skills.

The effective management of development requires a system of operational school–based monitoring and reviews of progress to assess whether or not the school is achieving its intended outcomes for students. The planning, development, monitoring and review cycle thus provides the basis for interactive feedback in a continuous cycle of improvement.

Quality Systems Outside of Schools

In a network organisation the quality systems of the strategic core must also be directed towards monitoring and supporting the overall quality practices of the organisation. The quality management functions of the strategic core and the operational units (schools) in such a system are set out in table 1.

As discussed in the previous section, the primary functions of developing and managing the structures, processes and practices for ensuring quality student outcomes are school–based. In terms of recent developments in Australian school systems the development function centres around the establishment of a school development planning and implementation structure. The development of staff to achieve the strategic development desired by the school community is a fundamental feature of this structure.

Regional quality systems, as part of a strategic core, are based on the key roles of cluster directors, principals, consultants and other staff who have accountabilities to ensure that the needs of schools are met through the provision of appropriate services and programs. These personnel are responsible for the provision of quality services to schools in a range of areas: curriculum, school development, student services, financial advice, etc. In essence, such roles are the web of the quality system that runs throughout the organisation.

Table 1: Managing quality in a network school system

	Functions of the Strategic Core	***Functions of Schools***	
	The Assurance of Quality	The Development of Quality	The Management of Quality
Key structures	• Organisation–wide quality review. • Facilitating structures to advise and assist the organisation to build effective quality systems throughout. • Criteria for organisational performance. • Processes for the effective translation of government policy into programs and initiatives for schools.	• Development of quality structures, processes and practices within schools. • Development of quality focussed training and development programs.	• A framework for the day-to-day management of quality for continuous improvement in student outcomes. • Systems for building–in practices for the management of quality.
Key processes and practices	• Evaluation of the quality of the network's outcomes and processes. • Reviewing the effectiveness of quality systems throughout the network. • Advising on how to achieve continuous improvement. • • Dissemination of best practice across schools. • Transfer into schools of knowledge and innovations from outside the system.	• Processes for supporting creative and innovative developments. • Curriculum development. • Development of the network between schools. • Sharing of practitioner knowledge with other schools.	• Monitoring the school's success in meeting the community's education needs. • Monitoring the success of the school in meeting its strategic development plan. • Responding to information about the school's success in meeting the deadlines and targets in its strategic development plan. • Professional interchange between schools within the network. • Effective teaching and management processes and practices.

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The strategic core has the overarching function of providing a framework for the school system's overall quality processes and practices. In this role the core has the key task of reviewing the effectiveness of the quality systems throughout the network. It also has the important role of acting as a primary channel transferring new knowledge and technology into the organisation from the external environment. Further, it has a role in acting as a catalyst and in the dissemination of knowledge of 'best practice' across schools in the network.

Systemic assurance of the performance of the system is undertaken through assessments of the effectiveness of individual programs and services; the development of individual schools and reviews of the extent to which they are meeting the education needs of their communities; and though assessing the performance of the school system in achieving the policy objectives of government.

The Role of the Systemic Review Function in Quality Assurance

External School Review Schemes

The Inspectorate systems of the past were the most prevalent form of external review processes in school systems. Before their demise in NSW in the late 1980s they moved away from 'inspection' *per se* to a form of review—known as school appraisal—which, with hindsight, can be viewed as an external audit of school's own internal review and development systems.

School Self–Evaluation

Like wholly external review systems, school–based internal self–evaluation and review schemes have failed to provide an adequate basis for the development of all schools. Hopkins (1989) provided a synthesis of the research on schemes of internal school–based review. He found that successful schemes:

- were based on a systematic review and evaluation process, and were not simply an exercise in reflection
- had an immediate goal to obtain information about a school's condition, purposes, and outcomes
- were designed to lead directly to action on an aspect of the school's organisation or curriculum
- were are a group activity involving participants in a collegial process
- were 'owned' by the school
- had school improvement and development as their primary objective, with an aspiration to progress the school towards the ideal goal of a 'problem solving' or 'relatively autonomous' school.

The major problem with school–based reviews was their failure to construct analytically critical reviews and evaluations of the process of schooling (Clift, 1987; Hargreaves, 1988; Hopkins, 1989). Evaluations tended to be defensive and often did not tackle issues central to the process of learning and teaching critically (Hargreaves, 1988). In addition, the development that should follow an evaluation was often not supported and managed successfully, and often did not result in the intended improvements (Hargreaves, 1988).

There are various reasons for these failures. Successful change in social organisations through a process of review, development and evaluation requires a high level of complex skills and management. It requires motivation (Clift, 1987) and access to training in skills of evaluation and the management of change (Clift, 1987; Hopkins, 1989). The significant investment of time required for successful school development means that all the participants must have a strong commitment to the changes needed, and be prepared to divert time and energy from other activities into the various phases of the program (Hopkins, 1989). The lack of experience in planning and orchestrating strategic change and in managing the commitment and time required to redeploy resources have also been significant reasons for the failure of school self–evaluation systems to lead to successful school development (Clift, 1987).

Other reasons for the failure of school–based reviews have been:

- they rarely involved all stakeholders – their focus has often been one of professional development for school staff, therefore pupils, parents, school councillors, community members, administrators have not always been included in the review process
- they were too time consuming and exhausting of the energies of those involved
- they often attempted to be all encompassing and tackled too large a task
- the period between reviews was often too long to make a continuous impact on the development process in schools.

In addition, the programs of change and development which have followed from such reviews have tended to fail because:

- of the substantial investment of time required and the high level of motivation necessary in order to translate review recommendations into development processes
- the participants have not had access to the requisite skills for managing and monitoring the change process, and this has resulted in
  - the change and development process not being tailored to the resources available
  - a failure to analyse and source the appropriate resources to successfully carry through with the development process.

Where school–based review has been institutionalised in an attempt to establish systemwide evaluation it has tended to fail in all but the most committed schools. School–based systems of review have been unable to

deliver the information necessary to assess the performance of the system as a whole, and to develop and implement change strategies in weaker schools.

A significant structural reason for the failure of systems of self–review to lead to effective development has been the length of the review and development cycle—often up to five years—which is derivative of the 'big bang' approach to development, as opposed to a continuous and incremental approach as embodied in the quality management approach to organisational development.

In light of this, there has been a strong move towards the development of systems of development review which combine self–review practices and aspects of external review.[8] These systems have a greater capacity to support the necessary development of skills and knowledge to overcome the obstacles discussed earlier. They can also overcome the debilitating effects of the earlier external approaches, such as inspection, by providing for the school's ownership of primary elements of the review process and a focus on development as well as accountability.

Quality Assurance Reviews

In order to focus on the assessment of quality in an individual school one might ask the following questions:

- How does this particular school go about the task of meeting the community's needs for education in the context of addressing statewide priorities for student outcomes?
- What is this school on about? How relevant are the goals of the school to the education needs of the community?
- How does this school know it is achieving what it has set out to do? What are the school's achievements?
- How does this school respond to what it knows about its achievements?

The overriding question which quality assurance reviews asks is 'How do we know that tomorrow's outcomes will be better than today's and yesterday's?' Asking this question does not mean that there is something inherently wrong or deficient in the current operation of schools. Rather, it reflects the need to provide a clear framework for public accountability and to ensure that all parts of the school system develop an approach to continuous improvement in providing learning opportunities for students.

This approach to quality assurance reviews provides the basis for them to make a constructive contribution to the development of individual schools. It also contributes to a framework for enabling schools to establish their own

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[8] The revised review systems recently implemented or currently being implemented in Scotland, England, New Zealand, South Australia and many US State systems are based on variations of this internal–external review model. Gallegos (1992) provides an overview of current developments across US states.

effective quality assurance practices. Such reviews can achieve this through the establishment of teams of school–based staff who work consultatively with the school community to identify and analyse current performance and areas for future development. Such teams also provide opportunities for intensive professional development in the full range of quality assurance issues relevant to school operations and the services and support required for the effective improvement of student outcomes.

The fact that schools operate in a continuously changing world and that the demands upon them have increased substantially over the last few years means that it is important that effective development and planning practices are implemented in schools. Planning enables schools to be proactive in their responses to their community's educational needs and to the changing external environment. Quality assurance reviews assist in this process by providing strategic evaluations of the current achievements and the state of affairs in individual schools within a context of how they are tackling development to further improve student performance.

Quality assurance reviews in this perspective provide a public account of what schools are currently engaged in and their development aims. That is, they satisfy the requirement of accountability to provide a statement of the current activities of schools, but they do this within a context of the future development of schools. Further, the accountability process is not only outcomes orientated, but development and outcomes orientated.

Quality assurance reviews provide a basis to acknowledge clearly and publicly the achievements of individual schools and of the school system in general. They also provide a strategic focus on 'best practice' for effective school development, particularly in relation to student learning. They provide both formative and summative feedback to individual schools through a joint internal–external review process.

The reviews can also monitor the effectiveness of program support and services provided to meet the needs and requirements of schools. This function also provides important information which can be used to enhance decision making for the improvement of individual programs and services to schools.

Developing Quality Systems in the NSW School System

Quality systems in schools operate in the context of school renewal plans and management plans. Most schools now regularly review their development and performance through internal periodic evaluations of the effectiveness of their programs. Staff development and performance agreements in schools and the quality assurance reviews of individual schools add to this process. Increased control over professional development funds has been granted to

schools so that they may use these resources more flexibly to meet the demands of their strategic development and management plans. The annual reports by schools to their communities are important in keeping the latter informed of the progress being made and providing them with a basis for indicating whether their school is meeting their education needs. Effective structures for community participation are being developed through the establishment of school councils, and parent and community organisations, which have been in place for some time. School communities will also gain an additional source of information and further involvement in schools through their direct participation in quality assurance reviews of schools.

On the broader canvas, systemic monitoring and evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the implementation of programs and services provided to schools. There will also be systemwide evaluations of the effectiveness of individual programs. Such program evaluations are driven by the framework of evaluations required by the Office of Public Management of all government departments. This requirement casts evaluation primarily in an accountability framework for government. In essence, such evaluations have been a vehicle for providing the basis for government reporting to parliament on the probity of government expenditure.

A somewhat broader perspective on the purposes and framework for program evaluations in currently emerging. This starts not by asking whether individual programs have achieved their objectives, but by asking whether the needs of the public as client and consumer have been met in the areas for which government has responsibility. In this framework, evaluation of achievement of the objectives of individual programs is replaced by a client focus as the essential terms of reference for the evaluation.

Discussion

The function of quality assurance in a devolved or network system of schools is to provide a catalyst to individual schools and assurance that they are attaining their strategic objectives. Individual schools are accountable for assuring their local communities of the quality of student outcomes. In doing this schools draw on a range of resources from both within and outside the network. The systemic quality assurance function provides assistance to schools through the transfer of knowledge from the external world to the network, across schools within the network, and assists schools to acquire the skills and knowledge to assess their achievements in meeting community education needs and clarify their challenges for the immediate future.

In the interim, as systems move from a decentralised system towards a network system with increased devolution to schools, there is limited capability and capacity to undertake the full range of quality assurance functions. The

role of the quality assurance function located at the strategic core of the organisation will change as the system matures. Over time it will move from its initial starting point in which it has a substantial input into the development of quality systems throughout the organisation to one where it is primarily involved in systemic quality assessment and the audit of quality systems.

Schools are at varying stages of emergence as network contributors. Over the next 2–5 years a significant proportion of schools in state systems will achieve the basis for self–sustaining development and therefore be able to move from a position of significant drawers of resources to one where they are net contributors of resources to the network.

There remain significant issues to be addressed if school systems are to develop further as network organisations. These include: the degree of line–management required to provide for the implementation of government policy; the arrangements for member organisations to enter and exit from the network—a matter which has direct implications for the universal nature of state school systems; the respective roles of communities as clients and government as the customer of the network. These issues, along with factors determined by the globalisation of the Australian economy, will shape any further restructuring of state school systems during this decade.

The move towards the establishment of a network system with its greater propensity to respond to changes in the external environment could mean that restructuring in school systems in the near future will be of a less cataclysmic nature. The globalisation of the Australian economy will have a direct effect on the demands placed on school systems. In particular, school systems will need to be able to adapt quickly to emerging demands. Individual schools should aim to develop the capability to construct their future by positioning themselves to meet likely demands before they arise. The 'learning and future–constructing' school could well be the primary feature of a quality system for schools as we approach the eve of the 21st Century.

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